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ABSTRACT

The sytems view of organizations recognizes that all parts of the organization, including people and organizations within networks, affect all the other parts. This study examines the interorganizational relationships of a rural community human service delivery system in northern Minnesota. The coordination and integration of human services appear successful in this community. Ten agencies from about 30 in the system were selected randomly for this study; the agencies included a runaway youth shelter, residential facilities for juvenile offenders, a Planned Parenthood facility, a battered women's shelter, an elderly adults' daycare facility, a nursing home, a shelter for the mentally ill, a group home for the mentally retarded, and a day activities center for the mentally retarded. These agencies had network relationships with one another and with public schools, social services, federal programs, medical and psychiatric services, citizen groups, legal authorities and court systems, licensing boards, funding agencies, shelters, and the media. Interviews with the ten agencies provided information on administrative history and relationships, funding, agency agreement on service provision, the value of interagency cooperation, and how intra- and inter-agency conflict is handled. Findings indicated that the systems attended primarily to the areas of productivity, rewards, and conflict. The primary variables contributing to the high effectiveness of the interorganizational relationships within the system network were sharing a similar ideology, maintaining task-oriented information exchange, and managing distinctiveness of agency role. (ABL)

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Variables in Effective Interagency Relationships

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Running head: EFFECTIVE NETWORKING

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Ninety-Third Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, California, August 1985.

Abstract

The nature of the interorganizational relationships among ten community agencies and their system networks in a rural northern Minnesota human-service system of care was assessed. The ten agencies were randomly selected from about thirty in a system of care in which the coordination and integration of human services appear successful and productive. The community's needs are basically met and the community is satisfied with its programs and services. Findings indicate that the system attends primarily to the areas of productivity, rewards, and conflict, and that the primary variables contributing to the high effectiveness of the interorganizational relationships within the system network are sharing a similar ideology, maintaining task-oriented information exchange, and managing distinctiveness of agency role and function within the network. Descriptions of these variables and how they operate within this system are given, and policy implications for interorganizational relationships within system networks are offered.

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Variables in Effective Interagency Relationships

Interorganizational relationships affect achievement of human-service-delivery system goals. In this paper, policy implications for community networks are derived from examination of factors that affect interorganizational relationships. A brief restatement of general knowledge introduces data collected on largely effective interagency relationships in a rural northern Minnesota community, and the resultant policy implications.

The systems view recognizes that all of the parts of a system, including people within organizations and organizations within networks, affect all the others through the many relationships among them. The relationships affect the quality of the final products or outcomes. The study of interorganizational relationships attends to effects of agency relationships with one another on the final products--here, the community human-service-delivery system. These products include not only content, such as kinds and amounts of services rendered and time, cost, and effort efficiency, but also processes, such as cooperation toward system goals and stimulation of creativity and innovation leading to enhanced community development.

Knowledge and skill: Managing effective interorganizational relationships, or networking, involves knowing or establishing the system's objectives, abilities and other resources, and

procedures for interagency communication and system-goal accomplishment, as related to, for example, obtaining perspectives, decision-making, organizing, fostering commitment and productivity, handling conflict, monitoring, evaluating, and reporting.

Communication: Managing effective interorganizational relationships also involves community-agency communication factors such as leadership and consultant styles, and community-government communication factors such as federal and state advocacy methods. The effectiveness of leadership and consultant styles depends upon more than just competence. The values, purposes and goals, tasks, methods, and attitudes and resources for change and development in the community, as reflected in the organizational network (here, the human-service system), affect the degree to which networking can be effective in the community. The effectiveness of federal and state advocacy for the human-service system depends upon more than fiscal (funding and reimbursement avenues) and legal (legislation enabling program start-up, client-welfare bills, expert testimony on issues like needs assessment and program outcome, etc.) resources. Design and articulation of guidelines, regulations, and legal procedures; program formulation; and state and local policy-making also affect advocacy, and effective communication within the system network and between the community system and the government system is essential to all of these tasks.

Facilitation: Effective interorganizational networking also involves attention to facilitation tasks and methods.

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Ideally, interagency relationships are strong, not isolationistic, utilizing natural community support systems as much as possible, and sharing responsibility and resources for meeting comprehensive system needs. There is broad participation of and cooperation among professionals, direct-service staff, and clients, with coordination of agency liaison staff for system benefits. Methods include content avenues such as information and guidance to accomplish content tasks--technical materials and assistance to guide program and system development and evaluation; public information and education; measurement of resource mobilization and goal attainment; etc.--and process avenues such as federal, state, and local meetings of policymakers, administrators, managers, and staff and client representatives as applicable to accomplish process tasks--open communication on perspectives, goal coordination, etc.; cooperation on information-sharing, taking initiative, follow-up, etc.; conflict resolution; incorporation of feedback from legislators, administrators, staff, clients, and community; and so forth.

A Rural Community Human-Service System

The nature of the networking transactions and relationships among community agencies in a rural northern Minnesota human-service system of care was assessed following Hall (1982),

Morrissey (1982), and Van der Ven and Ferry (1980), and with structured open-ended interviews. In this community, the coordination and integration of human services appear successful --that is, the community's needs are basically met and the community is satisfied with its programs and services. Data from interviews with agency directors revealed communication processes and other variables that most contribute to the effectiveness of these varied relationships within this human-service system of care.

Ten community agencies, randomly selected from about thirty within the system, were examined: A shelter for runaway youth, two residential facilities for juvenile offenders, a Planned Parenthood facility, a shelter for battered women, an adult daycare facility for the elderly, a nursing home, a shelter for the chronically mentally ill, a group home for the mentally retarded, and a day-activities center for the mentally retarded. The agencies with whom they had network relationships included many or most of the following: One another, public schools, Social Services, federal specialty programs, medical and psychiatric services, citizens' groups, legal authorities and court systems, licensing boards, funding agencies, shelters, and the media. Figure 1 illustrates the interorganizational relationships of one of the ten agencies.

Interviews were conducted with, and data collected from, directors of the agencies. The interviews questioned what

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community system-of-care agencies and organizations were involved in setting up each agency, if any, administratively or in terms of goals or services; to what extent each agency depends on any other agency for funding, other resources, support services, or clientele; to what extent agencies agree on community and client needs and the ways services should be provided; to what extent agencies provide the same kinds of services, share program or community goals, and provide similar staff training; to what extent each agency feels interagency cooperation is worthwhile, successful, and productive; and how intra- and interagency conflict is handled. The interviews provided descriptions and examples of the factors that lead to communication and conflict resolution regarding ideology, purposes, information exchange, community roles, etc.

Contact included letters, reports, meetings, telephone discussions, newsletters, and any other kind of written or verbal communication. Contact a few times a year was defined as Infrequent; an average of once a month, Occasional; and weekly or more often, Regular. Relationships were considered of high formalization if they were mandatory by law or legally binding; of medium formalization is agreements were written in correspondence or in a contractual form; and of low formalization if procedures reflected long-standing practice or verbal agreement only.

Cooperative relationships were defined as those in which the agencies and networks work actively to accomplish synergistic benefits to mutually important goals. Neutral relationships were defined as involving working together cooperatively for individual-agency or -system goals which do not contrast or interfere with interagency relationships.

Conflict resolution takes place in cooperative and neutral relationships as well as in conflicted ones. Conflict relationships, however, require more conflict resolution and it is at times somewhat less successful than in the cooperative or neutral relationships.

An interagency relationship conflict to a "small" extent was defined as one in which some conflict is frequently experienced from the difficulty or complexity of situational or specific variables; when conflicted to a "moderate" extent, strong or residual conflict sometimes prevent task accomplishment and personal relationships are uncomfortable, nonproductive, or counterproductive. When interagency relationships are conflicted to a "great" extent, the agnecies sometimes see themselves as adversarial, or there is a basic ideological contrast, or repeated difficulty or unresolved problematic situations persist between agencies.

The four most common responses to conflict, of greatly

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descending effectiveness, are to work it out, to accept an authority solution, to smooth it over, and to ignore it. When conflicts are worked out, it is through deliberate effort in negotation, compromise, and/or as open communication as possible. An authority solution is one in which outcome determination has to be made by an arbitrator with authority to bring about resolution or introduce mediation until resolution is possible. Smoothing over conflicts means not resolving them but pretending or asking that differences are put aside for the sake of system peace. Ignoring conflict, implying it is unresolvable or not worth the necessary or anticipated time and effort, and smoothing over conflict were reported the least-satisfying conflict outcomes.

Examples of issues relevant to conflict interorganizational relationships in this sample are:

- One agency believes another agency does not do an adequate job--for example, in protection of victims by known abusers, such as repetition of incest or other child abuse.
- Clients enlist the aid of one agency to counteract action taken by another, or play agencies against one another.
- One agency has the authority to prevent or affect what another agency seeks to do--e.g., court orders require, restrict, or modify agency action.

- Agencies have divergent values or philosophies regarding problems of the clients they serve--e.g., programs with religious bases vs. those without them; whether or not abortion information is offered along with other information regarding decisions about sexual behavior; etc.
- Frequency or lack of resolution of prior disputes and disagreements colors new cases--e.g., in interaction between police and staff from a shelter for battered women regarding handling of batterers.

Ideology, Information, and Function

These are the three factors repeatedly confirmed through the structured-interview information, description, and example to have most contributed to productive interorganizational relationships as well as to meeting community needs and expectations: Similar ideologies, task-oriented information exchange, and clarity and distinctiveness of community role and function for each agency.

Ideology: Whether agencies serve the same or different clients, program goals are similar--for example, establishment or return to self-sufficiency and high self-esteem, or prevention of further deterioration in functioning. Professional

training of staff and volunteers in different agencies is frequently similar, and many agencies train their personnel through in-service programs regardless of initial education or discipline. Through this fairly consistent community education, staff and volunteer recruitment, and in-service training, agencies support a common community ideology. Procedures, frameworks, and techniques, even when originated within other orientations, are used insofar as they are helpful in achieving basically humanistic system-of-care goals.

Information: Task-oriented information exchange is constant throughout agency networks, in daily communication, in new situations, in crisis, and in shared problem-solving activities. Interagency conflicts are usually worked out in a cooperative, also task-oriented, manner. The nature of typical conflict-resolution is additionally discussed below.

Function: Clarity and distinctiveness of agency roles and functions within the community and the community system of care, or any other network system, comprise an important contributing factor to the success of the network relationships. In this community, agencies coordinate with one another and with courts, hospitals, and schools, but do not depend upon other facilities within the community human-service system

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for their existence or continued operation. Agencies are not in competition for the same clients or the same funding or other resources. When multineed clients are served by more than one agency, different needs are served by different facilities. With high information exchange and similar values, coordination of the differing system responses to multineeds of clients is most often both streamlined and comfortable.

Productivity, Rewards, and Conflict

Networking concerns considered by network agencies to be of greatest importance to efficient delivery of human services were the areas of productivity, rewards, and conflict. Decision-making and procedures promoting constructive interagency relationships within these three areas reveal administrative attitudes that support the same humanistic ideology and information processes that enable the task-oriented activities to be so effective.

Productivity: For maximal productivity or goal-accomplishment in any interagency network (here, a human-service-delivery system), basic requirements include obtaining accurate information about and making carefully considered responses to practical concerns, such as costs, physical capacities of the facility, staff size, and personnel turnover; and fiscal and legislative accountability to the community and to local, state, and federal governments as applicable. Maximal productivity in areas such as personnel, leadership styles, and communication, however, is more complex.

Personnel in this sample are seen as increasingly useful as community consultants and spokespersons rather than restricted to limited and specific

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tasks only. They represent system goals and opportunities as well as the agency and themselves, and they are included in discussions of and development toward ideological goals as well as accomplishment of tasks designed to achieve those goals. Team building and group effectiveness are also seen as important personnel strengths to be utilized for personal, agency, and system benefits.

Leadership styles of administrators, community liaison staff, and advocates to the community or to governmental or other external systems are considered thoughtfully and adapted for maximal productivity in meeting system needs. Authority structure, decision-making methods, and influence styles are examined both in terms of internal management and in terms of interorganizational relationship effectiveness. The role of consultant/facilitator, utilizing natural community support systems, is so common and so effective that it is sometimes unnoticeable that agencies are other than natural community support systems.

Communication goes beyond the obvious needs for problem-identification, intervention implementation, and trouble-shooting. In terms of information dissemination, for example, an additional aim is to produce an increasingly streamlined flow, not a more complicated or uncomfortable one. Communication efforts therefore not only resolve the current issue but bring recursive improvements upon themselves. Communication is also used to maximize morale; for example, through win-win negotiations.

Rewards: Rewards in working for an agency and for a network--here, a human-service system of care--vary for different individuals. Generally

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in this sample, rewards relating to higher-level human concerns such as exemplified in Maslow's model of hierarchical human needs are important to all system participants--administrators, staff, volunteers, clients, and community members. Financial reward and security is of course an important consideration to personnel; however, another is level of personal satisfaction with agency-community interaction and personal contribution. Recognition for contribution, by the agency, clients, community, or system, is also an important reward. A fourth source of reward to many is a sense of community enhancement, a sense of maintenance or improvement, in the community quality of life.

Conflict: Conflict can relate to goals, expectations, orientations, values, training or education, financial concerns, policies, roles, special interests, etc. There is little doubt that, along with task-oriented information exchange, maturity among conflict participants is a major factor in successful vs. unsuccessful conflict management, according to the literature as well as to the efficiency of the interorganizational relationships in this sample. Valuing cooperation, working with others, ability to take the perspective of another, respecting the values of others, supporting others' strengths, absence of desire to control others, openness to experience and relative nondefensiveness, and moderate personal and program ambition are known maturity and sensitivity factors in relationship success. Handicaps include responses that, whether characterological or learned or both, are more individual than situational, such as low interest or negative attitudes.

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Other handicaps are primarily situational, such as slow progress in program/system development, or program/system needs that are exceptionally difficult to meet.

Agency personnel in this successful network describe productive interagency relationships as allowing for the following conditions: The problem or task determines how agencies coordinate effort toward accomplishment. Staff feel encouraged to create and maintain a working interagency network, and view themselves as interacting with one another for this purpose and as working toward system goals such as optimal client programs. They feel also that the community experiences a sense of competence and harmony in its network relationships.

Conflict situations are viewed by all as problems to be solved, tasks to be accomplished. Task accomplishment, including conflict resolution, is experienced as contributing valuable information and enhancing agency and and system skills. Communication overall is relatively open, undistorted, and inclusive of both task-related information and feelings or reactions.

When interagency relationships are conflicted, systems described include individuals' seeking personal advantage despite detriment to program or system goals, withholding of helpful information, promoting divisive or disruptive disagreement, or pointing to or emphasizing ineffectiveness in networking or in the work of other agencies.

When interorganizational relationships are poor, procedures for resolving conflict are sought, agreed upon, and implemented. Any procedural expectations or restrictions are named and explained. Adapting discussion and

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action to the needs of the situation is emphasized, and the strain of doing so is acknowledged. Interaction is encouraged. Consensus and decisions are requested, purposeless or chaotic action is prevented or corrected, etc.

Effective problem-solving depends heavily on both task-oriented information exchange and mature process interaction. The latter is enhanced by the above aids; the former is enhanced through standard problem-solving techniques: Understand the task (coordination, policy-making, conflict resolution, etc.) and decide the goal, the resources available, and how accomplishment will be determined. Define the problem, utilize interagency resources, relate outcome to problem definition, and collect and share factual data in a sequence something like obtain, examine, present, examine, evaluate, and conclude. Define an initial proposed solution, taking into account ideal and less-than-ideal but realistic solutions and any network limitations. If no solution can be agreed upon, check grop commitment to having a proposed solution, and find workable elements in rejected solutions to combine to guide construction of a new solution. According to this sample, experience with these activities and behaviors leads increasingly to comfort with such tasks, knowing how to accomplish them, and knowing how to evaluate what has been done.

An attempt is made to achieve both high productivity and interpersonal comfort within interorganizational relationships in this sample. Benefits are believed to include increased knowledge of self, other staff, and system goals and processes; utilization of feelings and values in constructive action;

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and an extension of skills, influence, resources, and productive collaboration. If conflict is not easily resolved, areas checked include whether conflict resolution is being delayed, such as by something's not being communicated (usually feelings, values, or ideological concerns; sometimes practical matters); whether all pieces of the problem have been brought out and are clear; whether roles, functions, and responsibilities are agreed upon; etc.

If change is needed for conflict resolution, the area is determined, such as training or education, policy or procedures, financial arrangements, responsibility clarification, system goal or task or procedure clarification, etc. Information is shared through data collection and feedback, discussions and seminars address identified issues, motivations and personal values are sometimes examined, role-playing and skill-enhancement activities are utilized, and the norms and values of the agency and system are clarified, conveyed, and changed as necessary through written policy. Change can also be implemented at the administrative level, in authority relationships (hierarchies, job descriptions, span of control, and decision-making processes used).

Policy Implications

Policy implications for maximizing participation, cooperation, resource utilization, and productivity in interorganizational relationships can come from testable theoretical assumptions, from research evidence,

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and from community experience. The following policy implications are derived from this community experience yet support contemporary theory and research on interorganizational relationships in general:

- Two powerful incentives exist for establishing and maintaining optimal interorganizational relationships. Optimal network relationships means that more service is offered with less effort and cost, and that both skills and motivation are continually enhanced in staff. Competence, authority, and communication skills are all needed in liaison staff especially. Communication emphasizing maturity and sensitivity is especially important.
- Since community expectations about a human-service-delivery system are greatly connected to personal and community values, understanding and communicating that understanding of values is crucial. Sharing values considerably enhances community interagency relationships as well as system goal accomplishment. It is unlikely that community expectations will change rapidly even if such change is viewed by some as desirable; working with and within them can be highly productive.
- Role clarity, information exchange, communication, conflict resolution, and values are all vitally important variables for integration among any network (here, community agencies). They all contribute to a system identity, a group identification important to the individuals within it and consisting of shared perceptions, communication, and meanings. This system identity,

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coupled with the practicality of clarity and distinctiveness of community role and function for each agency, leads to an efficient combination of agency autonomy and network interdependence.

- Conflict resolution is an integral part of efficient communication. Basic competence requires abilities to identify problems and contributing variables, and facilitate matter-of-fact but sensitive problem-solving of the relationship issues as well as the content issues. Negotiation and mediation can be assumed possible in all but legally binding content and always in relationship aspects of the conflict. Conflict resolution that increases information exchange, morale, and maturity among participants is a sigificant system benefit.

These networking efficiency strategies can be applied to any system of interorganizational relationships.

Legend

Contact

Infrequent . . . . . .

Occasional — — —

Regular ——————

Formalization

High H

Medium M

Low L

Relationship

Cooperative

Neutral

Conflicted

to a great extent

to a moderate extent

to a small extent

most often

ignored, unresolved

smoothed over

authority resolution

worked out

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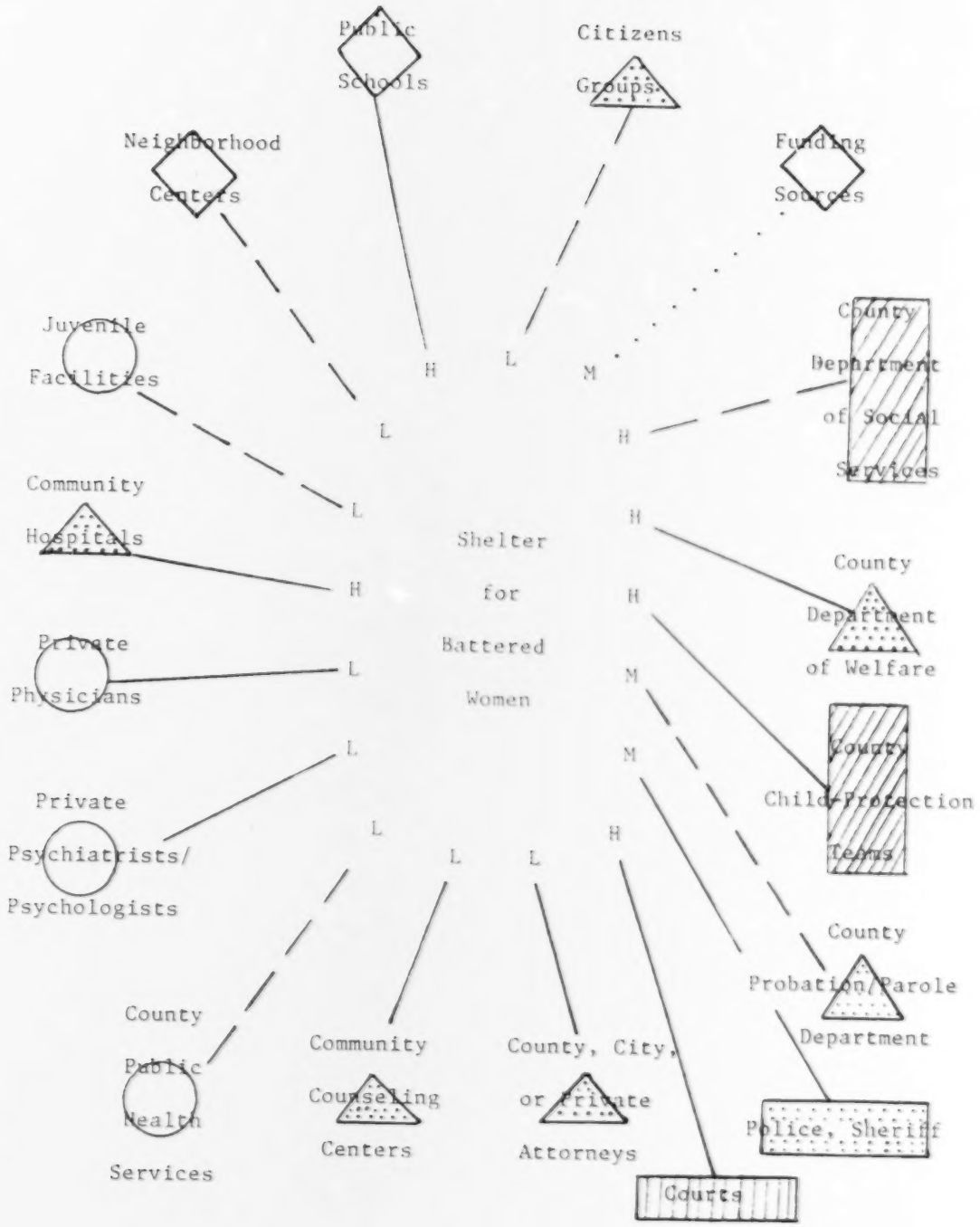

Figure 1. Example of Interorganizational Relationships.

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